

DOES THE SOVIET UNION FEAR THE UNITED STATES?

There is an old Russian peasant proverb, "Don't take your garbage out of the hut." Its meaning: when you wield power, do so in secret. This proverb remains the operating principle of the Politburo, which is shrouded in secrecy (in striking contrast to American presidents who rush to publish their memoirs as soon as they leave office). It is therefore impossible to gauge what that small coterie of septuagenarians thinks and feels about the United States. But some of the psychological components of Soviet high politics can be illuminated through a long study of Soviet history. And ordinary Russians are garrulous and animated people; they are quite ready to tell the interested visitor what they think. I am an historian, fluent in Russian, and have just returned from a two-week trip to the Ukraine. I would like to share with you my impression of the Soviet people's attitudes toward the United States, and my speculations about the views held by the men at the top.

July is a wonderful month to visit the Ukraine. The weather is balmy and the fields lush. Farmers' markets are well-stocked with produce grown on small, privately-owned plots and sold by old peasant women, babushki, whose wrinkled faces peer out of colorful flowered scarves. In the small river town of Cherkassy I came upon an outdoor market. Two babushki immediately recognized me as a foreigner and asked where I was from. "The United States," I said, smiling broadly over an enormous pile of carrots. "Why does your country want war?" one of them asked. "We only want peace, war is bad for everyone," added the other woman. I assured them that my country wants peace as well, but they shook their heads in discouraged disbelief.

I was last in the Soviet Union in 1978 for five months, and during that time was never once accused of coming from a jingoistic country. But that was

before the breakdown of detente. Since that time, and particularly in the past four years, Soviet newspapers and magazines — and political cartoons especially — have depicted the United States as a warmongering nation pursuing an adventuristic foreign policy and led by a fanatically anti-Soviet president who has made a "crusade" (they use that exact term repeatedly) of anti-Communism.

Without going to the U.S.S.R. there is no way of telling how this propaganda has been received by the people. Friends and colleagues returning from Moscow and Leningrad of late have in fact been reporting a generalized popular anxiety about the United States, and have been recounting stories much like the one I sketched above, of ordinary people, largely women, protesting the United States' purported militaristic stance. What struck me about the encounter I had in Cherkassy was that despite its small size and remote location, public fear of the United States was very much in evidence. It certainly does seem that the anti-American propaganda of the past several years has been enormously effective. My general impression is that the Soviet people — particularly those without much sophistication — do genuinely fear the United States, and that this fear has grown more intense since the deployment of missiles in Western Europe.

We may think, of course, that our past history best proves our peaceful intentions, since during the 1940's we never exploited our four-year monopoly of atomic weapons. Soviet propaganda, however, condemns our recent past behavior, arguing that we did use atomic weapons, twice, and that we have demonstrated our willingness to fight communism in Korea, Southeast Asia, and to some extent in Central America. Worse yet, the Soviet media labels our government fascistic, which is, of course, the most hateful term possible in a country that lost twenty million to the Nazis. "They kill you on the streets of Los Angeles. What's there to see in the United States? Fascism, that's — what!" said a tiny

old crone to me as we stood in a small alley in the beautiful old port city of Odessa. She drew deeply on her cigarette and leaning heavily on her cane blew out the smoke and said, "I am a veteran of the Great Patriotic War. I have seen enough of fascism."

As distressing as this kind of negative publicity is to the concerned American, it is of small import for two reasons. For one thing, ours is a confident culture; our national self-esteem is not at all affected by what the Russians say about us. Secondly, and more important, Soviet popular fear of the United States does not in any way inform that country's politics. The fear comes from a deliberate propaganda campaign designed to portray the United States as a menace to world peace and the U.S.S.R. as a peacemaker (public gardens that used to display red flowering plants in the shape of a hammer, and sickle now exhibit planted flowers that spell out the Russian word for peace). What does affect us all, of course, is the Communist Party leaders' perception of the United States. Do Mr. Chernenko and his colleagues fear our government and if so, what is the content of that fear?

There is no evidence whatsoever that the Politburo believes its own propaganda about the United States. It is hard to imagine the Kremlin's shrewd old guard actually thinking that we would be crazy enough to launch a first strike against them or against anyone else. But they do appear huffy and bellicose, an attitude that has filtered down to the quite ordinary Communist Party spokesmen with whom I interacted on my recent trip. "Why did your president call us an evil empire?" asked an English-language professor from Odessa State University of the American tourists to whom we were both lecturing during their travels through the Ukraine. This indignant professor was expressing the same prickly defensiveness that I believe operates right now at the Politburo

level. When the Soviet leaders are anxious, they act in aggressive ways, both at home and abroad. And today they appear upset and angered by what they perceive to be our government's disdainful refusal to accord them respect, and at times even legitimacy. This is where it becomes necessary to understand the psychology of the Soviet leadership.

Soviet political culture is one that includes a shockingly low self-esteem. Indeed it has often been said that the Soviet Union suffers from a massive inferiority complex. Therefore the Kremlin, unlike Washington, has an enormous need for visible proofs of world respect. When they call us names it matters little to our people or government. But when we respond in kind, they are enraged, because our government's invective feeds into a national psychology that has a high level of self-contempt. The Soviet leaders can be likened to a street bully in an urban neighborhood, the mixed-up kid who wants to have friends but is sufficiently twisted to alienate everyone, and ends up adopting offensiveness as his style, while continuing to get angry at the frustrating consequences, and to hate himself.

The men who rule the Soviet Union know full well that theirs is the only major world power with no friends and no real allies. I followed my recent trip to the U.S.S.R. with a week each in Romania and Hungary. I chatted with a variety of people. Not one had anything positive to say about their mighty Eastern neighbor; about Russia I heard only complaints, often in the form of bitter jokes. I was also struck by the fact that in neither country did anyone I asked admit to knowing the Russian language, although I know that students in both countries are required to study it.

While the leadership of the U.S.S.R. sees itself as underappreciated, isolated, and maligned, it appears convinced that the United States is unable

or unwilling to understand how the Soviet Union sees the world. The fear of looking foolish, clumsy or brutish runs very deep with them. They were enraged by the political fallout from last year's downing of KAL 007. Their press dwelt obsessively on the "anti-Soviet hysteria" that was "whipped up" by the Reagan administration. I suspect that Messrs. Chernenko, Gromyko, et al are genuinely worried that some terrible humiliation might come their way at any moment because of what they perceive to be the American government's refusal to recognize their status as a superpower. To them, being a superpower means having the freedom to deepen their security, if not through expansion, then at the very least through the inevitable proliferation of anti-American regimes, such as that of the Sandinistas. The Soviets see us as impossibly rigid and unrealistic, incapable of accepting political changes that are not to our liking — particularly in Central America. Moreover, they fear our possible exploitation of their evident economic woes and the concomitant erosion of popular solidarity with the regime. For reasons both within and beyond their control, they are deeply insecure. At the very bottom of this insecurity lies a profoundly pessimistic view of human nature. Their belief that people are low and untrustworthy comes from a centuries-old Russian peasant culture and in part from the precepts of the Russian Orthodox church. It contrasts strikingly with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy on which our government was founded — with its faith in progress and in the rationality and innate goodness of man.

With its vestiges of traditional culture, Soviet society today remains a far more conservative one than our own. Based on the old-fashioned virtues of patriotism, respect for authority, and loyalty to family and friends, Soviet social values are worlds away from the obsessive narcissistic quest for self-actualization that one encounters, for example, on the California coast. But time has a way of catching up, even with the U.S.S.R. Some of its

old values are eroding, enthusiasm for revolutionary legends and heroes has long since waned, and even the heroic memory of World War II is fading. In every Soviet town old men shuffle through the streets displaying rows of war medals on worn suit jackets of brown or grey — but no one so much as glances at them. This is a most vulnerable transition period in the history of Soviet society and psychology. Communist ideology is drained of all dynamism; social and political apathy is evident to the sensitive observer; and the most coveted cultural artifacts come from the West, especially the United States.

If the mighty and powerful in the Soviet Union do fear something American, they fear not our arsenal, but our culture. The Party leadership, the wider political establishment, and even to a certain extent a possible majority of Soviet people over fifty-five, see America as corrupting their nation's spirit with a flashy and seductive culture based on materialism, self-indulgence, a cult of youth, and a shocking moral lassitude. Indeed it is ironic that the evil empire of "Godless Communists" should assail our culture on moral grounds. But it does.

As a long-time scholar of Soviet history I am convinced that the Soviet Union's greatest asset has been not its economy, nor its technology, nor even its natural resources — but its people. I agree with the novelist, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who maintains that the U.S.S.R.'s six decades of suffering has produced a people with a greater strength and depth of spirit than the people of Western countries. The people of the Soviet Union know how to sacrifice and how to endure hardship. Without their courage the U.S.S.R. would be a very poor country indeed. The possibility that Western culture might erode that popular spirit must be truly frightening for Mr. Chernenko and his colleagues to contemplate. The Soviet people, by and large, admire American culture and fear our weapons. Their leaders, in contrast, respect our military might, but fear the power of our culture.

I believe that our government ought not to encourage any of these fears. When the Soviet people are fearful, they draw more closely around their leaders. When the leaders are frightened they become angry, and take that anger out on their own people and — to the extent possible — on the rest on the world.

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